

MYSTERY MAN OF AMERICAN DIPLOMACY

In the middle of a snowy night in 1942, an FBI agent slipped into a US Army barracks at Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont, and tiptoed down an aisle of sleeping recruits. Stopping at one bunk, the FBI man gently shook one of the soldiers awake and showed him his badge.

"What will you do for your country?" the man asked.

"Anything," the sleepy soldier replied.

Thus began what Lieutenant General Vernon A. Walters would describe years later as "my first intelligence assignment," a mission to infiltrate a group of Nazi spies broadcasting to German submarines from the nearby Stowe ski area. Walters was president of the ski club at the Army base; he had

been educated in Europe and spoke German.

"I performed this mission to the satisfaction of the FBI," he recounted in his memoirs, *Secret Missions*, published in 1978. "Later they were to send me a cryptically worded letter of commendation. It arrived at the battalion two or three days before I was to leave to go to Officers Candidate School. I thought that it would do me much more good to receive it there than at Fort Ethan Allen and arranged to have it strategically delayed a few weeks."

Today, after thirty-four years in the US Army and a four-year stint as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Walters is one of the Reagan administration's most important foreign policy officials, a kind of Lone Ranger for the new "quiet diplomacy." But Walters has also become the mystery man of American foreign policy, avoiding the congressional spotlight, refusing on-the-record interviews with journalists, and constantly traveling the world for behind-closed-doors meetings with presidents, dictators, and revolutionaries.

Walters aides turned down repeated requests for interviews with him. "It just makes his job more difficult," one of them explained. "He likes to move around discreetly."

"He works alone," retired CIA officer Dino Brugioni, a Walters admirer, says. "But when he goes out, he's prepared. He doesn't do anything in a halfway fashion. He's a real pro."

Since joining the State Department as ambassador at large early in the administration, Walters has secretly been a key back-channel emissary to Zaire, Kenya, Morocco, Ceylon, India, Nepal, Angola, El Salvador, Argentina, Zambia, and other countries. He has been a key participant in sensitive negotiations over Central America, the Falklands, and Southern Africa. In March, he slipped off to Havana for a four-hour chat with Fidel Castro.

"Hell, he probably just took out his American Express Gold Card and rented a plane in Miami," says Miles Frechette, head of the State Department's Cuba desk, with a laugh. "Of course," he quickly adds, "we're not confirming that he even went there."

By Jeff Stein

Walters' rise through the ranks is, on the face of it, amazing. He is a retired general who never commanded troops. He was a deputy director of the CIA though he never graduated from college. And he became one of the country's most trusted diplomats before he had spent a day in the State Department or an hour as a Wall Street lawyer — the usual route to the diplomatic service.

Walters speaks at least eight languages, maybe more. Within those eight are many dialects he is said to have mastered. It is reported that he likes to slip into a country unannounced before a meeting with a head of state so he can ride the buses around and pick up the local slang and intonation. In his memoirs, Walters explains the importance he places on language. "In the unending struggle for freedom," he writes, "we must be able to communicate with those who wish to be free. Too long have we expected all our friends to speak English."

WALTERS' DIPLOMATIC ASSIGNMENTS since the first months of the Reagan administration suggest that his principal mission has been to interpret the renewed American attitude of friendship to Latin American military dictators. His appointment was in fact the clearest possible signal to these regimes of a policy reversal from the human rights years of the Carter administration.

"He is an example of the importance this administration puts on getting along with military dictatorships," says retired US Navy admiral Gene LaRocque, head of the Washington-based Center for Defense Infor-

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mation. LaRocque disapproves of the "militarization of American foreign policy," but he points out why, from the administration's point of view, "it's important to have a guy like Walters: First, he's a military man. Two, he speaks the language. Three, he has an intelligence background. And four, he likes the job."

Walters conceded as much during a recent Washington lecture. In Latin America, he joked, his job was "to twist right arms."

To scores of Washington insiders, Vernon Walters is an enigma. Although he has played the role of discreet adviser to the top officials of five administrations, the mention of his name often draws a blank. He never married; until his mother died a few years ago, she accompanied him to his posts in Europe and Latin America. Today, his sister shares his Washington apartment.

"He is asexual, like a monk," observes John Carbaugh, a friend of Walters and a former aide to Senator Jesse Helms. Walters has told friends that his never marrying was a plus: It allowed him to spend more quiet evenings at home pursuing his favorite hobby, extensive reading in history and international relations. When he goes out, it is often an expedition to one of Washington's gourmet restaurants with a small group of friends from the Nixon administration.

ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 3, 1939, Vernon Walters heard a radio broadcast that would change his life. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain announced that negotiations with Hitler had failed. The world was at war, and Walters was joining it. He was 22 years old.

"I had found the path I was seeking," he later wrote. "I knew now what I wanted to do with my life. . . . I had found my place. I was not to lose this conviction in the thirty-four years that were to follow in the Army."

The war was an avenue of escape to the wider world Walters yearned for. Born in New York in 1917, Walters was the son of a British insurance salesman about whom he provides not a single full line of biographical data in his memoirs. From age 6 to age 16, Walters lived in France and

England with his family; there his facility for languages first became apparent. Returning to the United States, his father met with "serious business reverses," Walters recounts, "and I found it necessary to quit school and go to work."

In the Depression, he became an insurance claims adjuster and investigator, an unpleasant job that usually requires invalidating accident and sickness claims of workers for the business clients of the insurance companies. The job must have been particularly rough in the immigrant environs of New York. But Walters puts the best light on it. "I dealt with claimants who spoke languages that I could handle," he recalls, "and who lived within one hundred miles of New York. This involved a lot of travel by car. I found it interesting and was able to remain proficient in my languages."

His knowledge of German had qualified him for his basic training "intelligence assignment" in 1942, and later that year his proficiency in French landed him with American forces in North Africa. Slipping through Vichy lines, he almost single-handedly arranged for the bloodless defection of French troops to the Allied cause.

Throughout the rest of the war, Walters would serve in a variety of training and liaison assignments, many of which would introduce him to young Allied foreign military officers who in later years would become the leaders of their countries. Chief among these were the Brazilians, whom he trained at Fort Leavenworth,

Kansas and to whom he later was principal liaison officer in Italy. A fellow officer was struck by Walters' affinity for the Brazilians, which he felt was based on their shared Catholicism. "It was an instrument of rapport," the officer remembered. "It was something they had in common, and empathy was important."

At Fort Leavenworth, Walters became a close friend of Lieutenant Colonel Humberto Castello Branco, a young Brazilian operations officer who would become president of his country in a military coup twenty years later. Following the war, Walters' connections with Latin America deepened. As a military attache in Brazil in 1947-48, he was a key aide to President Truman and Secretary of State George C. Marshall at the Rio Conference and the Organization of American States summit in Bogota. Marshall then summoned Walters to Washington to work on recovery plans for Western Europe under Averell Harriman.

As US-Soviet relations froze, Walters moved onto a fast track of discreet politico-military assignments, first with General Dwight D. Eisenhower at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and later as an aide to Harriman on diplomatic missions to Iran and Yugoslavia in 1954. After Eisenhower was elected President, Walters became as invaluable to him as he had been to Truman, performing as an aide and interpreter for Allied summit meetings in Bermuda and for the Geneva Conference.

In 1958, President Eisenhower decided to send his Vice-President, Richard Nixon, on a Latin American tour.

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and he recommended Vernon Walters as his interpreter and aide. The trip would become one of Nixon's celebrated "six crises." But for Walters, it would be an eventual ticket out of the ranks and into the CIA. The incident where Nixon was jostled and spat on by an angry mob in Venezuela has entered the national political folklore. But few people remember that it was then-Lieutenant Colonel Walters who translated Nixon's epithets and hurled them back at the crowd. Their close personal relationship was sealed from that moment.

"Mr. Nixon showed intelligence, courage, and judgment," Walters recounts. "I was to testify before the Ervin Committee in 1973 of my admiration for him."

Walters was called before the committee to tell about White House efforts to enlist him in the Watergate coverup. He had been appointed deputy director of the CIA by Nixon only a few months earlier, in March 1972. H. R. Haldeman and John Erlichman thought Walters could be counted upon to turn off the FBI investigation into funds laundered through Mexico City for the Committee to Re-Elect the President.

Friends and admirers of Walters remember the affair as his shining moment, one that illustrates his superior character and integrity. He had refused to turn off the FBI and pay hush money to the Cuban burglars.

"I looked [John Dean] right in the eye and said, 'Fire everyone connected with this,'" Walters recalls in his book. "He was startled and then he said in a low voice, 'No one is going to be fired.' I then replied, 'Then, Mr. Dean, what is now a small conventional painful explo-

will become a multi-megaton hydrogen bomb and those who are not now touched by the matter certainly will be."

Turning Dean down, Walters writes, he "told him that on the day I went to work at the CIA I had hung on the wall of my office a color photograph showing the view through the window of my home in Florida. It was a beautiful view showing the

trees and the ocean at Palm Beach. When people asked me what it was, I told them that was what was waiting if anyone squeezed me too hard... and I left his office."

Walters' admirers like to recount this part of the story. They usually forget the fuller accounts by Dean, Erlichman, and Haldeman, which are not as flattering to Walters. Yet it is the omission that would seem to explain why the Reagan administration would enlist him in highly secret tasks and why Nixon remains a close friend.

The record shows that Walters did turn down the request — the second time, when it came from Dean, who refused to put it in writing. The first time he was asked, however — by Haldeman — Walters went straight to FBI director L. Patrick Gray. "I told him that I had come from the White House and that I was aware of his talk with [CIA director Richard] Helms on the previous day," Walters writes, "and while investigation of this matter in Mexico had not yet touched agency projects, continuation of it there might expose some assets."

Walters' recounting of the affair leads one to believe he was naive and misled. "I had been in Washington for six weeks at this point and it simply did not occur to me that the Chief of Staff to the President might be asking me to do something that was illegal or wrong." But at this point in his career, Walters had been engaged in various intelligence operations for more than thirty years.

Walters had been close to events during the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran, the U-2 affair, and the CIA's war against Fidel Castro. And in 1964, he was the US military attache in Brazil during the military coup that ousted Joao Goulart, the last civilian head of state in Brazil.

According to Walters' account, the United States stayed clear of those events, and he merely reported on developments. But top secret documents declassified in 1976 detail a US plan, dubbed "Brother Sam," by which the navy would step in if the coup appeared to be failing. Five days before the coup, the US am-

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bassador to Brazil, Gordon Lincoln, cabled that the probable new leader would be Walters' friend General Humberto Castello Branco.

On the morning after the coup was set in motion, according to the documents, the two men had breakfast, and Walters urged Castello Branco to assume the presidency. He did. With overwhelming support from the rest of the Brazilian military for his assumption of power, the United States called off "Brother Sam," and the military was in power.

Walters' pugnacious reaction to criticism of the US role in the coup is revealing. "The Communists and their friends see the need to denigrate those who have defeated them," he wrote in 1978. "So they spread the word that the Americans were really behind the Brazilian, Chilean, or any other revolutions they don't like. Unfortunately, many guilt-ridden Americans naively believe them."

Among a closer circle of friends, however, Walters' attitude toward US covert action seems to be more forthcoming. In 1980, he presented a paper entitled "Political and Propaganda Covert Action" to a small Washington colloquium of intelligence insiders. Then he said:

There are those who will say that trying to influence events or opinion in another country is immoral. But no one can deny that the first duty of any official personnel in another country is to increase the number and importance of the friends of their own country. In fact, it has been said that diplomats during their service in a foreign country should be judged by the measure in which they have increased the number of their country's friends and decreased the number of its enemies. Morality does not require that friendships and the efforts to gain them be broadcast to our enemies.

It is Walters' close relationship with the secret police of Chile that has left the darkest cloud over his reputation. At the time the United States encouraged the Chilean military to overthrow the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende Gossens, Walters was deputy CIA director, and

his job was to maintain liaison with "sister" intelligence services.

According to a detailed report by *Washington Post* correspondent Marlise Simons in 1975, the US and Brazilian intelligence services cooperated closely in the Chilean effort. In addition, according to the Senate committee chaired by Frank Church that investigated those events, the CIA may have provided the new Chilean secret police formed after the coup — known by its acronym DINA — with a "hit list" of opponents of the new regime. Between three thousand and five thousand were murdered, according to the best estimates. Thousands more disappeared over the years.

But a crucial event tying together Walters and the DINA was the September 1976 car-bombing murder in Washington of Orlando Letelier, a former Chilean diplomat then in exile.

According to authoritative accounts of the case, Walters was drawn into the efforts of Chilean assassins to come to the United States on their mission to kill Letelier. To this day, federal investigators remain puzzled as to why the deputy CIA director did not volunteer information then that might have led directly and quickly to the suspects. (See sidebar, page 50.)

The Letelier assassination was no obscure event. His car was blown up as he drove through the heart of Washington's Embassy Row in morning rush-hour traffic. As a former ambassador to the United States from Allende's Chile, moreover, Letelier was a highly visible and seriously regarded leader of the Latin exile community, with influential contacts from Capitol Hill to the World Bank. Within hours of his death, memorials to him were read

on the floor of the Senate, and his murder dominated the news media for weeks.

The FBI designated the case "a special," meaning it had top priority for its offices around the world. Eleven days later, assistant US Attorney General Stanley Pottinger convened a meeting with federal prosecutor Eugene Propper and CIA director George Bush, who pledged cooperation in the investigation.

Within hours of that meeting, however, there were leaks. Both the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* reported that US intelligence officials had "ruled out" any involvement of the Chilean secret police in the assassination. For months, FBI agents scoured the country for leads and came up empty-handed. When, after a year, they had firm grounds to suspect at least one Chilean agent had been involved, they still failed to find any American official who would come forward with information.

By this time, Walters was in retirement, writing his memoirs at his Florida beach house. There is no mention in them of the Letelier case.

Walters was eventually interviewed about the affair by federal investigators, "as a potential witness" for the prosecution, one told us, not as a target of the investigation. "He was not asked, 'Why didn't you come forward?' That was not our intent or interest," said the federal official. "If you ask me if I thought about it, sure I did."

The official had spent many hours discussing the case in exchange for anonym-

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ity. "Vernon Walters," he finally concluded, "did not obstruct justice. Could he have come forward? That's another question."

"No," says a man who has known Walters for thirty years, shaking his head. "He wouldn't come forward on something like that. It's not his way." But, the man quickly adds, "He was ready to testify to a Senate committee that Letelier was a Communist agent. He said he would." (According to the testimony of US prosecutor Eugene Proper, allegations popular in right-wing circles that Letelier was a Cuban-controlled "agent of influence" are completely unfounded.)

"A great fellow," former CIA director William Colby says of Walters. "His greatest asset is his integrity." In the language of the intelligence fraternity, this may be translated as silence. However, several acquaintances, admirers of Walters, say he remains an outsider even to the intelligence fraternity. "Not once since he left the agency [CIA]," says Angelo Codevilla, a member of the Reagan transition team at CIA, "has the agency invited him back for anything. Not for a ceremony, not for a dinner, not for a seminar, a briefing, anything. All this can be explained by one word — 'social.' He is not a member of the club. He is not social."

"In the CIA, he probably disliked being part of such a big administrative machinery," says Fritz Kraemer, a lifelong friend. Kraemer and his wife talked of Walters for a few hours in their Washington home while a summer thunderstorm drenched the sidewalks outside. They both used affectionate, even reverential terms to describe him.

"Walters can talk to any taxi driver with total simplicity and deep humanity," Kraemer said in his thick German accent. "For me, to think of him as deputy director of CIA is very difficult." They had met in 1951, Kraemer said, when both worked for General George C. Marshall on the postwar recovery plans that later bore his name. Kraemer went on to become a senior politico-military analyst in the Defense Department, and he takes credit for "discovering" Henry Kissinger as a 19-year-old Army private.

"Kissinger must have supported his becoming deputy director of CIA," Kraemer mused. "It's always said Nixon made him that, but it's highly unlikely it would have happened without Kissinger's certain approval."

In 1969 Nixon and Kissinger had made their decision to seek the historic opening to Communist China. At the same time, they hoped to get peace negotiations with North Vietnam on track by initiating secret talks with Le Duc Tho. Walters, as military attache in Paris, was tapped to make the first advances to both camps and subsequently to handle the extraordinarily sensitive logistics for Kissinger's secret trips to France. Kissinger and Nixon praised his performance in their books.

"I could always send him out to talk to someone," his later boss at the CIA, William Colby, commented. "And I never had to worry about him doing something on his own." Under Colby, and later, James Schlesinger and Bush, Walters apparently became the CIA's chief liaison to friendly foreign intelligence services.

The four years between Walters' retirement to Florida

in 1976 and the election of Ronald Reagan were rocky ones for US-Latin American relations. Carter appointees such as Patricia Derian, who headed the State Department's human rights bureau, took their chief's rhetoric seriously and unleashed a torrent of tongue-lashings at America's traditional Latin friends, who, for the most part, were Pentagon-supported military dictators. With the White House supporting congressional arms cutoffs to Chile, Argentina, and Guatemala, US-Latin relations, in the midst of a historic shift, deteriorated.

On the campaign trail, and later in the White House, the Reagan team was determined to reverse the effects of that era. Blaming Carter for the collapse of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and the fires of revolution crackling through Central America, the Reagan team decided to draw a political line in El Salvador and restore hemispheric alliances with military regimes.

Alexander Haig, the new Secretary of State, "had been out of touch for five years" when he took office, Fritz Kraemer said. "So he reached out for people he worked with before" — like Walters. He thought for a moment before adding, "I cannot imagine any CIA people would have recommended [Walters] nor [would anyone] in the Army. By a process of elimination, it was Haig's idea."

If so — and no one with direct knowledge would comment — Walters' appointment got an important lift from the office of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, who had assumed the chairmanship of the Senate Subcommittee

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tee on Latin America. A close friend of Walters is John Carbaugh, then Helms' foreign policy aide and a key transition official at the State Department. Carbaugh confirms that he strongly favored Walters' appointment.

Almost immediately, however, Walters' role in the administration drew provocative notice. In February, he arrived in Buenos Aires on the start of a full-flank effort by the administration to rally support for the administration's case in El Salvador. Argentina, in the administration's plan, was to be the US surrogate, fostering resistance to subversion in Central America. The emerging entente provoked a gathering protest here and moved Argentine Nobel laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel to release an open letter to President Reagan denouncing the visit.

Relations between Argentina and the United States continued to improve over the following months, while evidence mounted that Buenos Aires had been recruited to help efforts to topple the Sandinist government in Nicaragua, as well as to aid military efforts against Salvadoran rebels. Increasingly, moreover, Walters and his counterparts in the Argentine military were being portrayed in Buenos Aires as the real policymakers, operating outside their countries' foreign policy bureaucracies. For example, while Argentine foreign minister Oscar Camilion came to Washington for an official visit in August 1981, Walters, one of the administration's key Latin affairs officials, was in Buenos Aires for secret talks with Argentine officers.

On that trip, according to the London-based *Latin American Weekly*, Walters negotiated an eight-point secret agreement with Argentina

that included an Argentine pledge for more aid to El Salvador and US help for Buenos Aires' nuclear program if it signed the nonproliferation treaty. The diplomatic romance came to an abrupt halt when the United States tilted toward the United Kingdom in the Falklands dispute.

In May 1981, Walters stopped in Guatemala on his rounds to patch up relations with traditional Latin allies. It was here that the Carter human rights policy had probably reached its nadir. After an exchange of name-calling in 1977, Guatemala's military dictator had told Jimmy Carter where he could stick his arms sales and stonily turned his back on the North. The repression in Guatemala, extreme even by the standards of Central America, continued to worsen: In a nine-month period spanning the election of Ronald Reagan and Walters' arrival in Guatemala, for example, rightist death squads financed by businessmen and protected by, if not part of, the military, murdered seventy-six provincial, national, and town leaders of the Christian Democrat Party.

"There will be human rights problems in the year 3000 with the governments of Mars and the Moon," Walters said in Guatemala. "There are some problems that are never resolved. One has to find a solution that respects a being's right to live without fear. But as I see it, the best way to do that is not to impose the ideas of one nation on top of another."

Walters said it was "essential" to "earn the confidence of the people and get rid of the guerrillas who are against liberty." He added, "You have to answer military attacks militarily."

"He came down here," recalled a former high-ranking US diplomat in Guatemala,

"and there was a lot of back-slapping between him and [former president] Romeo Lucas Garcia. They went into the palace and talked for a few hours, and I'm sure Walters thought that all he'd need to do to get the Guatemalan army to stop murdering peasants was to have a little friendly chat. The Reagan administration clearly wanted to restore aid to Guatemala, but they need Lucas Garcia to clean up his act somewhat."

The official leaned forward and played with a pencil on the top of his uncluttered desk in the State Department. "So Walters told him, general to general, that he'd have to make things look better or Congress would never let go the purse strings. And Lucas Garcia smiled and said everything would be all right, and he and Walters shook hands, and that was that." The official leaned back in his chair with a broad, tight smile. He did not need to add that the killing had not stopped in Guatemala. "Vernon Walters may be a great linguist," he said. "But he's not much of a diplomat."

In Chile, Walters called such a policy "constructive ambiguity." The occasion was a January 1982 gathering of the Association of American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America, held in Santiago. Probably no other military regime had suffered such humiliation under Jimmy Carter as that of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, especially since the regime had refused to extradite top secret police officials indicted in the Letelier murder. But Walters forecast a new era of friendship.

In his luncheon address,

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Walters addressed the attitude of the Reagan administration toward human rights violations. The United States, he said, should deal with them "quietly and privately, the way you deal with a neighbor who is doing something out of line." The delegates heartily applauded.

On April 20, 1982, a reporter in El Salvador placed a call to the US Embassy inquiring about Vernon Walters' rumored arrival in the country. The answer later came back: "The person who is not here refuses to see you."

John Carbaugh, aide to Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Latin America, arrived the same day. His mission was to talk rightist leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, just elected president of the new Constituent Assembly, into cooperation with the Christian Democrats. (D'Aubuisson, once a Salvadoran army major, was described by former US ambassador Robert White as "a cold-blooded, pathological killer.")

Walters spent the crucial, post-election days in El Salvador twisting the arms of the military to force the country's warring rightists and Christian Democrats into what one observer called "a shotgun marriage." A letter to Salvadoran politicians from the US Embassy had warned that respect for human rights and retention of the land reform program were essential for continued US aid. But the rightist coalition victory in the elections had threatened all that. The American game plan for El Salvador was on the verge of falling apart.

Within weeks, the rightist-dominated Constituent Assembly legislated the rollback

of the land reform program. In the countryside, rightist death squads considered to have the protection of the military resumed the systematic assassination of Christian Democratic officials and town mayors. In effect, D'Aubuisson had pulled off through the elections what he had failed to do by force of arms during the Carter administration: a coup d'etat. The military, fronted by a legally elected rightist party, was back in power.

On Capitol Hill, Senator Charles Percy, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, vowed that "not one cent" would go to El Salvador unless land reform was resumed. In the House, liberals decimated Reagan's military aid requests.

After two months of "quiet diplomacy" in El Salvador, the Christian Democrats had been routed, the rightists had gained power but forfeited Capitol Hill, and the rebels were again on the offensive.

On January 20, 1981, the Reagan administration put its grip on American foreign policy with great confidence. As Ronald Reagan raised his hand to take the presidential oath on the steps of the US Capitol, Jimmy Carter flew off to Germany to welcome home the hostages from Iran, an event which for many symbolized the disasters and humiliation of the past four years. The new President promised an era of "quiet diplomacy" to repair the damage.

By the summer of 1982, in the midst of the war between Argentina and Britain, former US ambassador to El Salvador Robert White was able to quip at a Washington conference that the Reagan administration had certainly put its

mark on foreign policy. We no longer walked quietly and carried a big stick, he remarked. "We speak stridently and carry a boomerang."

To the Reagan team, the loss of Somoza in Nicaragua and the enmity of the generals in Chile, Argentina, and Guatemala in the Carter years had been a defeat for the United States. Peasant revolts in El Salvador and the rest of Central America were, in their mind, a direct result of Cuban meddling. "I would be less than truthful," Walters volunteered at his confirmation hearing in 1981, "if I did not say ... that I think the real answer to those insurrections lies in Nicaragua and Cuba and our broader relationship with the Soviet Union." Instead of being seen as a long overdue revolt of the impoverished, the civil war in El Salvador was placed squarely on the East-West chessboard. Weekly verbal thunderbolts were loosed at Cuba from the State Department.

"This man really understands things," his friend Fritz Kraemer sought to explain, groping for just the right words, "such as the unimportance of merely human approval or success. While he is quite happy with decorations and such, he knows that that is not reality."

"He is, you know, quite a religious man," Kraemer continued. "He is almost a mystic. He is in permanent motion, but because he has religion as an anchor, he will never be empty. He finds ... consolation in his religion against the misery of the time. It makes him always hopeful." There was another silence.

"Walters," Kraemer added, "is never depressed. He carries an inner certainty that has nothing to do with this world."

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VERNON WALTERS AND THE DEATH OF ORLANDO LETELIER

Vernon Walters had set July 2, 1976, as the date for his retirement as deputy director of the CIA, but a troublesome matter in Paraguay required his personal attention. The Paraguayan chief of detectives had uncovered a CIA informant in the country and had thrown him in jail, hoping to use his prize as leverage against the American Embassy. The US ambassador, George Landau, had fired his CIA station chief over the incident, and the situation was a mess. Walters flew to Asuncion.

George Landau had other problems as well. President Alfredo Stroessner's closest aide had called him earlier with an urgent request. He wanted the US Embassy to issue visas to two Chilean secret police agents who would be traveling to the United States on false Paraguayan passports. It had to be done immediately. President Augusto Pino-

chet of Chile had personally made the request to his fellow South American dictator. Landau asked for more time.

Don't worry, Stroessner's aide said. Everything has been taken care of. The CIA knows what is going on. The Chilean agents will report directly to Vernon Walters as soon as they arrive in Washington. It's all been arranged.

The events of July and August 1976 would assume a critical importance a few years later. What had been set in motion in the Paraguayan capital were the first steps in the plot to assassinate Chilean diplomat and exile leader Orlando Letelier. On the evening of September 19, 1976, one of the men who had come to Asuncion from Chile to get a false passport crawled under Letelier's car in Washington and strapped a baking tin packed with plastic explosives to the undercarriage, directly under the driver's seat. Two days later, as Letelier wove through rush-hour traffic along Washington's Embassy Row, chatting with two companions, the bomb was detonated by remote control. Letelier, his legs blown off, was almost instantly killed. Ronni Karpen Moffitt, 25, a research associate at the Institute for Policy Studies, bled to death on the sidewalk. Her husband, Michael, escaped serious injury.

The Chilean agent who had masterminded the assassination was Michael Vernon

Townley, the Iowa-born son of a Ford Motor Company executive in Chile. He was one of the two men sent to Asuncion for false passports and US visas. It would take the FBI two years to find and arrest him.

Two exhaustive books and several articles have closely examined the events of July-August in Asuncion and Vernon Walters' role in them.

Assassination on Embassy Row, an investigative account coauthored by *Washington Post* correspondent John Dinges and Saul Landau, a colleague of Letelier's at the Institute for Policy Studies, was published in 1980. This year, the US prosecutor in charge of the case, Eugene Propper, assisted by Washington author Taylor Branch, published his own account, *Labyrinth*. From these and additional interviews with key officials, it can be concluded that Vernon Walters was well informed that a major Chilean secret police operation in the United States was being planned and that Walters never came forward to offer his knowledge to federal prosecutors. As the years passed, in addition, it would become apparent that Walters had a close relationship with the head of the Chilean secret police who planned the Letelier hit, Colonel Manuel Contreras, and had not told investigators of his meetings with him in Washington in the

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days just before the assassination.

Walters has steadfastly refused to comment on these allegations. "He does not give on-the-record interviews," according to Lee Martiny, an aide.

At the heart of the matter are the cables US ambassador George Landau sent to Walters from Asuncion describing the pressure put on him by Paraguay to issue visas to the Chilean agents. The Paraguayan official applying the pressure was Conrado Pappalardo, a close associate of President Stroessner, and it was Pappalardo whom Walters visited to untangle the mess caused by the CIA informant's capture.

"He got on famously with the Paraguayans," Branch and Propper wrote, "telling Pappalardo and other officials countless stories about how he had outwitted the Communists in subterranean battles all over the world. The ugly controversy over the Paraguayan spy seemed to dissolve in the warmth of the camaraderie between Walters and his hosts." At the airport, the deputy CIA director and Pappalardo exchanged private telephone numbers and parted with vigorous embraces.

Landau, ever the prudent diplomat, had been leaving messages for Walters about the Chilean agent ploy and had sent photostats of the two phony passports to him in Washington, asking for instructions. Using CIA cable channels, Landau at one point asked Walters whether the request for visas was all part of a quid pro quo arrangement on the spy scandal. The weeks

went by without a response from CIA headquarters.

On August 4, Walters finally replied. He indicated no familiarity with the Chilean scheme and said there was no reason the agency should meet with the Chileans in Washington. He advised Landau to inform his State Department superiors.

On August 5, ambassador Landau stiffly informed Pappalardo that the visas were canceled and asked for the return of the passports. It would not be until October 29 — a month after the Letelier murder — that they were returned, with the photos ripped out.

The cables between Landau and Walters were hot property inside the State Department after the Letelier murder. It had immediately been apparent to officials there that there could be a connection between the Paraguayan events and the assassination.

On October 15, 1976, the State Department's Chile desk officer, Robert Driscoll, wrote a memo to John Keane, head of the American Republic Affairs section. "The General Walters connection may or may not be important," Driscoll wrote. "Besides Stroessner, Col. Manuel Contreras considers himself a bosom buddy of the General, I think the FBI should know. The General is an old hand. He can take care of himself." Driscoll went on to worry about the appearance of a coverup.

"If the fact that we had intentionally withheld information on the Letelier investigation became public, we would be subject to a storm of criticism," he observed. "I recognize that we run the risk of leaks. In my judgment, we run greater risks if we appear to withhold information."

Driscoll recommended that the cable be turned over to the FBI, but the cable and his memo lay buried in State Department files for more than a year after the Letelier murder. Meanwhile, FBI agents scoured the world for leads on a tall, blond Chilean who had been seen in the company of Cuban exile terrorists.

FBI agents arrived within moments of the explosion that ripped through Letelier's car in Sheridan Circle. Blood splattered the street. The stench of burned flesh sickened rescue workers. Michael Moffitt, his face black with soot, turned from his dying wife on the sidewalk and accosted FBI agent Carter Cornick. "It was DINA, the goddamned fascists!" Moffitt screamed, using the Spanish acronym of the infamous Chilean secret police. Neither Cornick, nor the Washington police, nor prosecutor Eugene Propper had ever heard of the DINA.

No one aware of the Paraguayan events came forward that day, nor did information on what was buried in State Department files and at the CIA come into Propper's hands until October 1977. After untying the Paraguayan mess and handling Landau's queries from Asuncion, Vernon Walters had retired to his Palm Beach home.

"Why didn't Walters come forward?" asks a key official in the Letelier investigation. "I don't know. The only person who knows the answer to those questions is Vernon Walters."

— J.S.